

The Epistologese experiment: The Theory of Non-knowledge and the Illusion of Meaning

Euclides Barbosa Ramos de Souza

Universidade Federal da Paraíba, Brazil

Received: 27/Sep/2025

Revised: 19/Oct/2025

Accepted: 23/Oct/2025

Published: 28/Oct/2025

Copyright: International Journal of
English Literature, Linguistics, and So-
cial Sciences: A Multidisciplinary
(IJELS-Multidisciplinary)

This is an open-access article under the
CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract

This paper develops an argument grounded in the Theory of Non-Knowledge (TNK), introducing Nullification as a logical and epistemic tool that enables the creation of non-contradictory concepts by separating them from their traditional definitional entanglements. These redefined units, expressed as X(NS), such as Freedom(NS) or Happiness(NS), are not semantic reductions, but functional reformulations. Through a single-case demonstration, it is shown that coherent interpretations can emerge from semantically null texts, revealing that understanding does not depend on inherent meaning. TNK uses this to expose the arbitrariness and fragility of traditional epistemic assumptions. Rather than collapsing knowledge into confusion, TNK establishes a new category of epistemic clarity: non-knowledge as a deliberate and rational outcome of nullification.

Keywords: Non-Knowledge, Nullification, Epistemology, Interpretation, Semantic Projection.

I. Introduction

The Theory of Non-Knowledge (TNK) offers a radical departure from conventional epistemology. While traditional philosophy has long struggled to define the precise conditions under which knowledge can be justified—often via the justified true belief (JTB) model originating in Plato's *Theaetetus*—TNK takes a different route. It does not seek to repair these conditions or supplement them with new criteria, as seen in Gettier's (1963) critique of JTB, Kant's a priori categories, or Popper's falsifiability principle. Instead, TNK introduces a novel logical operator: *Nullification* (SOUZA, 2025).

Nullification is not classical negation. It does not deny a knowledge claim's truth content, nor does it replace it with an alternative epistemic theory. Rather, it renders the justificatory framework itself unnecessary by severing the claim from its dependence on definitional coherence, referential stability, or infinite conceptual regress. This operation opens the way for a new category of epistemic unit, designated as X(NS): tokens of traditional knowledge that have undergone nullification and are thus requalified as non-knowledge—not in the sense of error, but as clean, contradiction-free, functional assertions.

The "Epistologese"¹ experiment demonstrates the need for such a framework. In this case, readers (both lay and expert) were presented with a *syntactically coherent*, but *semantically null* philosophical text—carefully crafted to mimic the abstract and authoritative tone of contemporary academic writing. Despite being designed to

¹ "Episto-" from epistēmē (Greek for knowledge) signals philosophical or epistemic content; "-logese" echoes legalese or bureaucratese, terms used to denote obscure or overly technical language understood only by specialists. It carries the implicit critique: a manufactured dialect that sounds like knowledge, but functions as a barrier to general understanding.

convey no intentional meaning, the text was consistently interpreted by readers as profound, complex, and insightful. This outcome reveals a cognitive mechanism TNK seeks to make explicit: the projection of interpretive coherence onto form alone.

This phenomenon aligns with concerns raised by Jacques Derrida (1976), particularly in *Of Grammatology*, where he critiques the metaphysics of presence and shows that meaning is always deferred, never fully present in the signifier. Likewise, Wittgenstein, especially in *Philosophical Investigations* (1989), argues that rule-following is not grounded in abstract definitions, but in contingent linguistic practices – yet never explains what prevents the system from devolving into arbitrary interpretation.

II. Arbitrary Interpretation

To test the epistemic claims central to TNK, an experiment was conducted in which a text, carefully constructed to be syntactically well-formed but semantically vacuous, was presented to a group of readers. The text, composed in the stylized register typical of academic philosophy – what TNK designates as Epistologese – included recursive abstractions, pseudo-technical terms, and thematic cues commonly associated with epistemological discourse. However, at no point did it convey propositional meaning or coherent argumentation. In essence, it was a linguistic artifact built to mimic philosophical depth without carrying any epistemic content.

Despite this, the respondents – ranging from lay readers to trained academics – offered interpretations that were not only coherent, but often elaborate. They extracted concepts, frameworks, theoretical tensions, and even authorial intentions from a text that, by design, contained none. This outcome demonstrates with empirical clarity one of TNK's central insights: the machinery of interpretation *does not require intrinsic semantic content in order to function* (and TNK promotes a *more functional* view of the concepts). Human cognition – and, increasingly, artificial cognition – can impose semantic architecture onto formal structure alone.

This phenomenon is not simply a curiosity of misreading or over-interpretation; it reveals a structural flaw in epistemic authority as traditionally conceived. From the standpoint of TNK, this moment of misfired coherence is not an accident or anomaly, but a default condition of meaning-making. It aligns with Nietzsche's radical suspicion (2001) that "truths are illusions we have forgotten are illusions," and with Michel Foucault's (2002) analysis of discourse formation, wherein the rules for what counts as "truth" are internal to power-laden linguistic systems, not to external realities.

Moreover, the experiment provides a living refutation of the idea that meaning must be transmitted by an author and decoded by a reader. As Stanley Fish (1980) argued in his theory of interpretive communities, meaning does not reside in texts, but in the *conventions* and *expectations* of readers (arbitrary criteria). TNK accepts this, but pushes further: it asks, what if these expectations can operate entirely in the absence of semantic substance? The Epistologese experiment suggests they can – and do.

In traditional epistemology, such a result would be framed as a failure of communication or a misfire of intention. But from the TNK perspective, it is a productive event: it shows that understanding is an act of projection, not discovery. This is where nullification comes in. The experiment nullifies the assumed connection between epistemic legitimacy and semantic grounding, proving that this has always been an arbitrary decision, as any X(NS) token is. It shows that what readers interpret as "knowledge" might arise not because something meaningful was said, but because something sounded as if it must be meaningful.

This explains how entire domains of academic discourse can function and reproduce meaning without necessarily having a stable referent. The phenomenon parallels Sokal's infamous hoax, wherein nonsensical but jargon-heavy content was published in a peer-reviewed journal simply because it conformed to the rhetorical form of knowledge. But, TNK is not merely critical of this; it formalizes what Sokal only exposed: that interpretive coherence is not a proof of knowledge, but a projection of expectation.

This demonstration validates the function of X(NS) units in TNK: if meaning can be successfully attributed to semantically null content, then traditional epistemic concepts like "freedom," "justice," or even "truth" can be re-qualified as non-knowledge tokens – used functionally, *without the burden of infinite justification*. The Epistologese experiment shows how arbitrary meaning can be constructed from null inputs, and that such constructions are

epistemically indistinguishable from their “authentic” counterparts. Therefore, TNK’s central thesis is confirmed: knowledge, as traditionally defined, is not epistemically privileged, but structurally contingent—fragile, performative, and fundamentally optional.

III. Informality, Persuasion, and the Illusion of Depth in Philosophical Language

Philosophical discourse often oscillates between clarity and obscurity. A plausible explanation is that many philosophers intentionally select broad or ambiguous terms — often sourced from ordinary language — to minimize contradiction and maintain control over their arguments. Those who are not among the 'founders' of philosophical vocabulary might feel compelled to redefine existing terms to ensure their system remains self-contained and unassailable. However, this strategy carries epistemic risks: it can render texts excessively subjective, accessible only to their authors or those embedded in the same interpretive tradition.

This problem was famously anticipated by George Orwell in his essay *Politics and the English Language* (1946). Orwell critiques the strategic use of vague or abstract language as a means of political manipulation, noting that obscure phrasing often disguises a lack of substantive meaning. He contrasts a concrete biblical sentence with its modern, bureaucratic counterpart to illustrate how clarity is often sacrificed for perceived sophistication. According to Orwell, such stylistic habits reflect the mistaken belief that language is an organic process rather than a tool intentionally shaped for communication.

Philosopher H. P. Grice formalized similar concerns in his theory of *conversational implicature* (*Logic and Conversation*, 1975), especially in his maxims of quantity and manner, which advocate for brevity and clarity. Both Grice and Orwell underline that effective communication depends on cooperative principles and the avoidance of unnecessary complexity.

This raises a crucial question: What is the function of excessively ornate philosophical language? If comprehension depends on private clarifications by the author — who might be inaccessible or deceased — then the discourse fails its communicative task. Worse, it might create a culture of mystique, where interpretive obscurity is mistaken for intellectual depth. This phenomenon results in what might be called “meta-subjectivism”: a subjective interpretation of an already subjective text, producing divergent and incompatible understandings among readers who all claim to have 'understood' the same work.

Even in analytic philosophy, known for its emphasis on clarity, Saul Kripke (*Naming and Necessity*, 1980 [2012]) shows that rigorous ideas can be expressed informally. He discusses metaphysical modality using everyday language and imaginative scenarios, without sacrificing philosophical depth. Likewise, thinkers like J. L. Austin (Speech Act theory, *How to do Things with Words*, 1962) and Paul Grice demonstrate that revolutionary theories can be conveyed with lightness and accessibility.

Historically, even Descartes sought simplicity in expression, aiming to be understood by ordinary readers. Conversely, Jacques Bouveresse, in *Prodiges et vertiges de l'analogie* (2006), critiques the overuse of metaphor in scientific and philosophical discourse, warning that its literary appeal often masks informational emptiness.

Philosophers bear a responsibility to assess whether their writing communicates what it intends. In practice, however, many texts become so interpretively flexible that any meaning extracted is more a reflection of the reader’s projection than the author’s intention. This leads to a paradox: *if meaning depends entirely on interpretation, then the epistemic status of the text is undermined.*

To expose this issue empirically, the current paper adopts a playful, but rigorous strategy. A syntactically well-formed yet semantically meaningless philosophical text is presented to readers. Because it mimics the rhetorical style of dense academic writing, it elicits serious attempts at interpretation — despite having no intended content. The experiment shows that knowledge-like interpretations can arise from null input, demonstrating what the TNK calls *epistemic projection*. As long as the text appears formally coherent, semantic associations emerge by cognitive necessity.

The structure of this text itself reflects an informal tone. This is not a lack of rigor, but a methodological choice. As Kripke, Grice, and even Descartes show, serious ideas can and should be communicated accessibly. TNK

aligns with this tradition by privileging logical consistency over stylistic grandiosity. Rather than pursuing inductive generalizations, the experiment here aims to demonstrate a logical possibility: if one instance suffices to show that interpretation can occur without semantic substance, then epistemic certainty becomes logically unnecessary. As logic teaches, to show that something is *possible*, only one concrete case is needed.

Finally, this paper embraces the idea that philosophy need not exclude enjoyment. Intellectual rigor and playful provocation are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the joy of discovery might be heightened when it reveals the fragility of the very structures we assume to be stable – especially when it turns out that *understanding itself* can be simulated in the absence of meaning.

IV. The Experiment: Interpretation Without Meaning

The central experiment of this study invites participants to interpret a syntactically correct, but semantically meaningless paragraph. The text is composed of randomly selected terms arranged to mimic the formal structure and rhetorical tone of philosophical writing. To enhance credibility, the text is attributed to a real, but obscure author, such that verification of their existence is possible, but recognition is unlikely. This approach was inspired by physicist Alan Sokal's 1996 hoax, where he submitted a deliberately nonsensical article – *Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity* – to the journal *Social Text*. His goal was to expose the lack of academic rigor in postmodern cultural studies by showing that ideological alignment and stylistic mimicry were enough to secure publication (SOKAL, 1996).

However, while Sokal aimed to critique editorial standards, this experiment goes deeper: it targets the very foundations of epistemic legitimacy. Instead of testing gatekeeping institutions, it tests the mind's capacity to extract meaning from void. In the context of the TNK, this is a demonstration of *nullification in action* – the transformation of a text into an epistemically void object whose interpretations nonetheless simulate understanding.

To contextualize this, consider the following passage by G.W.F. Hegel, drawn from *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

"But, as there is an empty expansion, there is also an empty depth; just as there is an extension of substance which spreads into a finite multiplicity lacking the force to hold it together, so there is an intensity lacking content, which, keeping itself as pure force without expansion, is identical with superficiality" (HEGEL, 1807 [1992], p. 25–26).

Even among philosophers, Hegel is notorious for opacity. Readers often disagree over the meaning of such passages. By contrast, philosophers like Saul Kripke communicate equally profound metaphysical insights using accessible, informal language. This contrast highlights the interpretive instability of texts that rely more on abstraction than clarity.

The paragraph used in this experiment follows what TNK identifies as the structure of "pseudo-epistemic depth". It mimics philosophical jargon to create a surface of credibility. Here is the fabricated text:

"The insertion of the aesthetically appropriate and rationally modulated conjuncture permits, therefore, the detailed ascension of the intrinsic and necessary capacity of external conceptualization, which, by definition, brings forth a sculptural totality and, why not say, an artistically formalized being-for-not-being submerged, from the outset, in temporally obsolete yet spatially adequate dimensions."

Although generated randomly, the passage *appears* intellectually dense. Participants consistently attempted to interpret it, despite the absence of any authorial intention. This affirms TNK's hypothesis that *interpretation can occur without meaning*, as long as the text exhibits surface-level coherence.

The key lies in what TNK might call the "formal structure of philosophical genius":

(1) Begin with an abstract noun or vague concept.

(2) Apply a grammatically sound, but semantically empty predicate.

(3) Rather than justify the claim, predicate the predicate – layering complexity without resolving the original assertion.

(4) Repeat, using increasingly generic or metaphorical terms, until the structure resembles philosophical discourse.

This recursive system produces what TNK calls X(NS): nullified knowledge tokens that simulate meaning without requiring semantic grounding. In this case, “fabricated text (NS)”; that is, *someone has arbitrated* for a meaning for the text, as the New Science (NS) prescribes, since there is not absolute knowledge in the first place, as TNK establishes. Because of their syntactic and stylistic mimicry, these texts invite projection. Readers interpret, not because there is something to understand, but because the format cues them to assume meaning must be there (because “it is” philosophical).

Thus, this experiment validates TNK’s central thesis: *the appearance of meaning is not evidence of a solid and unique epistemic content, but of an arbitrary action of the mind*. Interpretation can be triggered by form alone. And once we accept that, we must also accept that knowledge—traditionally understood—might often be an illusion produced by rhetorical familiarity and not by conceptual substance.

V. Responses and Empirical Confirmation of Epistemic Projection

To test the central claim of TNK—that interpretive meaning can arise from semantically null content—a number of university-educated participants were asked to interpret a fabricated philosophical paragraph (mentioned in section 4). The paragraph was composed syntactically in accordance with formal English grammar, filled with abstract and pseudo-academic terminology, but entirely devoid of semantic intention.

Each participant received the same prompt: the text was framed as a difficult philosophical passage from a legitimate, but obscure author, and they were asked to help interpret it under the pretense that it would contribute to a class assignment. Their backgrounds varied slightly across the humanities and social sciences, ensuring familiarity with academic language, yet sufficient distance from specialized philosophical training.

The range of responses confirms TNK’s concept of epistemic projection:

- One respondent, trained in history, declined to answer, citing inability to understand the passage—indicating a perceived failure to grasp rather than questioning the legitimacy of the text itself.
- Another interpreted the paragraph as a commentary on cultural embeddedness and temporal change, drawing from familiar anthropological concepts despite the absence of actual referents in the text.
- A third constructed a detailed analogy using “Lego blocks” to explain how stable conceptual units adapt to social demands over time, offering a cohesive, but entirely imagined interpretation.
- One participant, with a background in geography, inferred themes of enculturation and temporal dynamism, again projecting coherence onto the null content.
- Notably, a response from OpenAI’s GPT-4 also produced a detailed interpretation, referencing dialectical metaphysics and cultural dualities such as modernity vs. obsolescence. The model did not question the text’s authenticity, treating it as a legitimate philosophical passage. This indicates that both human and artificial cognition are susceptible to the illusion of meaning triggered by rhetorical form.

These interpretations demonstrate *empirically* what TNK claims logically: interpretation is not contingent on content. Once formal coherence is perceived, semantic projection follows. The text’s structure, abstract vocabulary, and stylistic familiarity activated interpretive mechanisms in readers who assumed that epistemic content must be present.

Importantly, the goal of the experiment is not statistical generalization, but logical demonstration. According to the principles of logic, a *single instance suffices* to prove the possibility of a phenomenon. This is not a claim about frequency, but about structure: if one person can extract meaning from a text with no intended meaning, then semantic grounding is not a necessary condition for interpretation.

This distinction between logical possibility and empirical plausibility is critical. Scientific inquiry often seeks probabilistic patterns across samples. TNK, however, deals in logical sufficiency. In this context, a single confirmed case of epistemic projection is adequate to nullify the necessity of semantic content in knowledge claims.

The experiment is also replicable in principle by any reader. Unlike closed scientific procedures, the tools involved are cognitive and linguistic. The empirical dimension emerges, not from laboratory precision, but from everyday interpretive behavior. What it shows is that even without semantic substance, interpretive structures are not only activated, but generate what appears to be knowledge.

In conclusion, the responses provide empirical support for TNK's thesis. They reveal how interpretive meaning can emerge from formal cues alone, and that the authority of knowledge might rest more on style than on substance. The implications for epistemology are profound: knowledge, in its traditional sense, is no longer epistemically necessary. Through the lens of TNK, it is shown to be replaceable by structurally coherent non-knowledge.

VI. Conclusion

This study does not aim to critique academic style or linguistic elitism for its own sake. Its goal is not to assert that all philosophers use obscure language to obscure meaning, nor to generalize from a small data set that all knowledge is illusory. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate—through one replicable and empirically grounded example—that what we consider knowledge might, in some cases, originate from semantically empty texts. The implication is not that all knowledge is meaningless, but that the boundary between meaningful and meaningless knowledge is less stable than commonly assumed.

The experiment demonstrates the logical possibility that interpretive understanding does not require intrinsic content. If at least one case can be shown in which a reader extracts coherent meaning from a text that was deliberately constructed to convey none, then the necessity of semantic content in epistemic claims is formally nullified. As Descartes wrote in *Meditations* (1983), it is prudent not to trust that which has once deceived us. If knowledge—understood traditionally—has once produced convincing illusions, we must reconsider its reliability.

This finding has particular relevance to philosophy, which uniquely aims to define the very meanings of abstract concepts. Unlike other disciplines, philosophy cannot operate on unexamined premises. But, when it uses highly abstract language to examine its own foundations, it risks circularity, or worse, generating only the illusion of depth. The experiment suggests that what is often perceived as profound insight might be the result of rhetorical form rather than conceptual substance.

The conclusion here is philosophical, not statistical. While science relies on numerous data points to establish empirical generalizations, philosophy requires only a single logically coherent instance to challenge a universal assumption. In this case, the assumption is that epistemic understanding must be grounded in semantic intention. The experiment shows this assumption can be false.

Even if most knowledge is valid, the mere possibility that some of it can emerge from structurally sophisticated, but content-empty texts, weakens the epistemic authority of form alone. This reinforces TNK's position: that knowledge and non-knowledge are not always distinguishable by content, but by the expectations and interpretations they invoke.

This is not an argument for epistemic nihilism. Rather, it is an argument for epistemic caution: for the recognition that rhetorical coherence and semantic clarity are not synonymous. The experiment confirms that the machinery of interpretation can produce meaning, even in the absence of intentional content, and that this effect becomes more potent when texts appear to belong to intellectually prestigious domains such as philosophy.

In a world where scientific discourse often relies on precise, testable claims, philosophical discourse should also aspire to clarity. The purpose of this work is to raise awareness of how easily knowledge claims can emerge from purely formal characteristics, especially when cloaked in academic authority. If this article is deemed unhelpful, then the reaction itself might underscore the very concern it raises: that the authority of knowledge continues to depend too heavily on stylistic conventions rather than epistemic substance.

Ultimately, the experiment serves as a philosophical demonstration that meaning is not a prerequisite for perceived understanding. From this, TNK concludes that it is logically and empirically possible that some, or even much, of what we call knowledge might have emerged from structurally coherent, but semantically empty origins.

References

- [1] ARISTÓTELES. *Metafísica*. Tradução de Edson Bini. São Paulo: Martin Claret, 2002.
- [2] AUSTIN, John Langshaw. *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- [3] BOUVERESSE, Jacques. *Prodígios e vertigens da analogia: De Aristóteles a Thomas Kuhn*. Tradução de Luiz Carlos Bombassaro. São Paulo: Editora UNESP, 2006.
- [4] DESCARTES, René. *Meditações sobre Filosofia Primeira*. Tradução de Luiz Jacintho do Prado. São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1983. (Coleção Os Pensadores).
- [5] DERRIDA, Jacques. *Of grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- [6] FISH, Stanley. *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.
- [7] FOUCAULT, Michel. *The archaeology of knowledge*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith. London: Routledge, 2002.
- [8] GETTIER, Edmund L. "Is justified true belief knowledge?" *Analysis*, v. 23, n. 6, p. 121-123, 1963.
- [9] GRICE, H. Paul. *Logic and Conversation*. In: COLE, P.; MORGAN, J. L. (Ed.). *Syntax and Semantics: Speech Acts*, v. 3. New York: Academic Press, 1975. p. 41-58.
- [10] HEGEL, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Fenomenologia do espírito*. Tradução de Paulo Meneses e João Ribeiro do Nascimento. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1992. (Original em alemão: *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 1807).
- [11] KRIPKE, Saul. *Naming and necessity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980. Edição brasileira: *Nomear e Necessidade*. Tradução de José Horta Nunes. São Paulo: UNESP, 2012.
- [12] NIETZSCHE, Friedrich. *Além do bem e do mal*. Tradução de Paulo César de Souza. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2001.
- [13] ORWELL, George. *Politics and the English language*. London: Horizon, 1946. Disponível em: <https://www.orwellfoundation.com>. Acesso em: 30 jun. 2025.
- [14] PLATÃO. *Teeteto*. Tradução de Jorge Paleikat. São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1983. (Coleção Os Pensadores).
- [15] POPPER, Karl R. *Conjecturas e refutações: o progresso do conhecimento científico*. Tradução de Sérgio Bath. Brasília: UnB, 1982.
- [16] SOKAL, Alan. *A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies*. In: SOKAL, A.; BRICMONT, J. *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*. New York: Picador, 1998. (Original article: *Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity*, 1996).
- [17] SOUZA, E. de. The Theory of non-knowledge and the New Science: a philosophical and scientific revolution applied to practical life. *Filosofia, Essência e Existência: questões fundamentais e reflexões filosóficas*, Cap. 5, p. 38-55,, 2025. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22533/at.ed.750112524035>
- [18] WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig. *Investigações Filosóficas*. Tradução de José Carlos Bruni. São Paulo: Nova Cultural, 1989. (Coleção Os Pensadores).